Morality, Ethics, and Transgression in Edith Wharton's Short Fiction

Michele Ware

North Carolina Central University, U.S.A.

Abstract

This essay examines the recurring motif of transgression in Edith Wharton's short fiction, which demonstrates the author's career-long development of an aesthetic that foregrounded the often unresolved conflict between individual morality and the morality of prevailing social convention. Although Wharton clearly explored transgression and its attendant issue of morality in her novels, it is in her short stories that she examines a wider range of morally and ethically challenging situations, particularly those involving sexual transgression—in fidelity, divorce, forbidden desire—and sexual morality. Focusing on two representative short stories—"The Long Run" (1912) and "Roman Fever" (1934)—this essay argues that in Wharton's short fiction, we can see a fairly radical imagination at work, especially in stories like these, in which Wharton implicitly places value on transgression, aligning herself with those who defy convention, whatever the costs. Such a sensibility reflects Edith Wharton's understanding that transgression was an essential step in the process of social change. These stories suggest that Wharton saw transgression as an unavoidable force, necessary for breaking out of whatever binds and stifles the human soul: social institutions, internalized and external expectations, custom. Yet in all of her stories of transgressive acts, there is always a return to a moral position, implied if not actual, and based on personal responsibility and ethics. These stories illustrate Wharton's guides to ethical behavior: responsibility, awareness, knowledge--not appetite.

Keywords: transgression, social custom, marriage, divorce, social responsibility.

In their Introduction to *On the Turn: The Ethics of Fiction in Contemporary Narrative in English*, Bárbara Arizti and Silvia Martínez-Falquina articulate and celebrate "the polyphonic nature of," what was identified over twenty years ago as, "the turn to ethics" (xiv). They note the number of "open questions" generated by this renewed interest in the connections between ethics and literature, yet they recognize that "there is also a generalised and very positive attention to issues of responsibility, solidarity, and community; to the power of creativity and dialogue; to the self as being open to encounters with the other, which helps us look at our neighbors, close and distant, in

Ex-Centric Narratives: Journal of Anglophone Literature, Culture and Media; Issue 1, 2017; eISSN: 2585-3538.

ways more egalitarian and democratic" (xv). Arizti and Martínez-Falquina conclude: "The ethical reflection is about improving our place in the world, and our relation to the world we are placed in" (xv). These statements provide a way of examining the recurring motif of transgression in Edith Wharton's short fiction—the expression of what R. W. B. Lewis identified in his biography of Wharton as "the heretical side of her nature" (109). At the heart of Wharton's abiding interest in the breaking of boundaries were not only her private transgressive desires, but a career-long development of an aesthetic that foregrounded the bitter conflict between individual morality and the morality of social convention. While the motif of transgression and its attendant issue of morality clearly link Wharton's short fiction and her novels, the moral and ethical dimension is especially strong in the short stories. Here the area of inquiry is expanded to include a wider range of situations that are morally and ethically challenging, from simple bad judgment ("Friends" and "The Best Man"), minor dishonesty ("The Rembrandt"), questionable artistic integrity ("The Potboiler" and "The Portrait"), and cowardice ("The Lamp of Psyche" and "The Journey"), to the rather more serious transgressions of embezzlement ("A Cup of Cold Water") and even murder ("A Bottle of Perrier," "Confession," and "The Bolted Door"). One of the most dominant and recurring subjects in Wharton's short fiction, however, is sexual transgression, by which I mean infidelity, divorce, desire, any kind of expressed or unexpressed sexuality that would meet with the disapprobation of an individual's social network, or that would conflict with an individual's social and moral training. Transgression of all sorts fascinated her, but sexual morality is a subject she turned to again and again. Of her eighty-six short stories published over the course of her career, biographer R. W. B. Lewis identified over two dozen stories that center on marriage, adultery, and divorce alone. Wharton's treatment of "the marriage question" he asserted in his Introduction to *The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton*, was "one area of experience which she was perhaps the first *American* writer to make almost exclusively her own" (ix). Lewis charges her, however, with a "resolutely traditional cast of ... imagination" (ix), a critique echoed twenty years later by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who argue that Wharton was "too skeptical in her cultural analysis to permit herself fully elaborated radical imaginings" (2: 165). While it is true that Wharton limits the success of sexual transgression in her fiction—there are no completely happy endings per se—the recurring motif of transgression, of a violation of boundaries, signals a fairly radical imagination at work, especially when we consider the stories in which Wharton implicitly places value on transgression. Time after time, she aligns herself with those who dare to defy or resist a narrow, conventional morality, showing enormous sympathy for the transgressors in her fiction, as well as for those in the world around her. This sympathy, I think, reflects a sensibility that saw transgression as a necessary (though often painful) step in the process of social change.

Critics have long recognized the difficulty of codifying Wharton's moral philosophy. Marilyn Jones Lyde, one of a group of literary critics who may be considered the first

wave of Wharton scholars[1] (writing from a year or two after Wharton's death through the 1950s), attempted to come to terms with Wharton's literary preoccupation with convention and morality; focusing on the novels, she constructed an elaborate system of ethics based on Wharton's readings in philosophy and on evidence in the novels themselves, a system marked, she feels, by relativity: "Edith Wharton ... believed that as long as there is a conflict of individual and group requirements, ethics can only be relative. There will not always be an absolute right or an absolute wrong for every situation, but sometimes only a relative right or least wrong" (44). The best part of Lyde's work is the opening chapter, on the "apparent contradictions" in Wharton's fiction (the widely divergent readings generated by the stories and novels), which she tries to resolve; but her conclusion, that "all her fiction represents the solution of the ethical dilemma by a fundamental standard of the necessary balance between individual morality and group convention" (45), suggests an equivalence, a reconciliation, and an equilibrium (between convention and individual morality) that simply don't exist in Wharton's fiction. Similarly, Barbara White, part of the second wave of Wharton scholarship,[2] calls Wharton's view of morality "contextual—everything depends on the particular situation" (80). She demonstrates the difficulty of showing just which side of the ethical fence Wharton was sitting on at any given point in her career. For example, "The Reckoning" seems to exhibit Wharton's "reservations about divorce," while a story like "The Quicksand" shows the pernicious effect of remaining in a morally repugnant marriage (White 79). Wharton is not easy to pin down. In her short stories, the task of the individual almost always involves a choice between conventional morality and individual fulfillment, what White calls "the necessity of weighing alternatives" (81). Out of the tension of that process, the constant pull of conflicting desires, impulses, and expectations, Wharton creates a dynamic art that resists moral exhortation even as it articulates the moral struggle. Still, we can identify aspects of Wharton's moral compass in the choices her characters make and in the results of those choices.

In her discussion of *The Age of Innocence*, Lyde points out the conflicting impulses at work in the text, citing as evidence Newland Archer's apparent submission to the demands of old New York society, along with the "persistent undercurrent of revolt throughout the novel" (5). This same duality exists in the short fiction and often results in a similar outcome, that is, the *apparent* triumph of convention over individual rebellion. Yet, as Lyde notes, the critics vacillate between viewing Wharton as a conservative traditionalist and hailing her as a social visionary who advocates protest. The failure to reach a consensus (a failure that persists today in Wharton scholarship) stems from

[1] This first wave of (predominantly male) Wharton scholars were largely concerned with establishing Wharton's reputation and fixing her place in the literary canon; it includes Edmund Wilson, Alfred Kazin, and Blake Nevius, whose 1953 *Edith Wharton: A Study of Her Fiction* provided the first comprehensive overview of Wharton's career.

[2] Wharton biographer R. W. B. Lewis serves as a bridge between first- and second-wave Wharton scholarship. This second wave of Wharton scholars, writing from the late 1960s to the present, has been dominated by feminist reconsiderations of the author's work, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, and includes Cynthia Griffin Wolff, Gloria Erlich, Elizabeth Ammons, Millicent Bell, and Judith Fryer.

Wharton's inconsistent portrayals of transgression in her fiction. At times she is quite positive and treats her transgressive characters with sympathy; in these stories, the act of transgression has some value. But in other stories, transgression is pure violation, an exercise of appetites, which she cannot condone. Two powerful short stories, one regularly anthologized ("Roman Fever") and one lesser known ("The Long Run"), representing two different stages in her long career, perfectly illustrate Wharton's rich and varied exploration and suggest that she believed transgression could have a social, a moral, and an aesthetic function.

The clearest statement of the value of transgression appears in a story in which the characters resolutely refuse to transgress. In "The Long Run" (1912), Wharton shows the disastrous results of the failure of two of her characters to violate conventional standards of behavior. Halston Merrick and Paulina Trant hover on the verge of adultery, yet when Mrs. Trant volunteers to abandon her husband and publicly acknowledge her relationship with Merrick, he refuses to allow her to sacrifice her position in society. The story is told retrospectively, first from the point of view of an old friend of Merrick's, someone who hasn't seen him for twelve years, and then from the point of view of Merrick himself, who tries to explain the diminished thing his life has become. Because we see Paulina Trant and Halston Merrick first through the disappointed apprehension of the narrator—who knew them both as vibrant figures from his past—we face the magnitude of all the two have failed to become.

The narrator's account establishes the sad transformation of Merrick from a man of thought and possibility to something very different. Having looked forward to a good conversation with Merrick, the narrator realizes that his old friend has changed: "It was not merely the change that years and experience and altered values bring. There was something more fundamental the matter with Merrick, something dreadful, unforeseen, unaccountable: Merrick had grown conventional and dull" (2: 302-303). Yet he is even more surprised by the change in Paulina Trant. He has not recognized her, and when Merrick points her out to him, he finds her "worn down" and terribly unlike her old "rare" self (2:305). "The Long Run" follows the pattern of a number of Wharton stories, in which two men reminisce over their altered circumstances, first in the public setting of a social gathering, and then in private, where they can unburden themselves. When the narrator joins Merrick later in the week, he anticipates a good explanatory talk. But instead Merrick gives him a manuscript of essays he has been working on, and he asks for his opinion. The manuscript, however, exhibits the same conventionality and dullness the narrator has seen in Merrick: "The essays were judicious, polished and cultivated; but they lacked the freshness and audacity of his youthful work" (2: 306). And Merrick's opinion of himself matches the narrator's: at fifty, he realizes the mediocrity of both his writing and his life.

The narrator's disappointment in his friend and his confusion over the discrepancy between his past and present must be palpable, because Merrick offers him an

explanation. He tells him of the rare passion that he shared with Paulina Trant twelve years earlier, and his own stupidity at throwing it away:

> Love is deeper than friendship, but friendship is a good deal wider. The beauty of our relation was that it included both dimensions. Our thoughts met as naturally as our eyes: it was almost as if we loved each other because we liked each other. The quality of a love may be tested by the amount of friendship it contains, and in our case there was no dividing line between loving and liking, no disproportion between them, no barrier against which desire beat in vain or from which thought fell back unsatisfied. Ours was a robust passion that could give an open-eyed account of itself, and not a beautiful madness shrinking away from the proof. (2: 310-311)

They are content with the slow, developing spiritual nature of their relationship until Paulina's husband decides to travel for his health, and the proposed journey precipitates a crisis for Merrick. After an emotional confrontation, she sends word to Merrick that she will come to his home. She arrives late in the day, after dark, and announces her intention to stay: "I haven't come for a night; if you want me I've come for always" (2: 314). But Merrick fails her, because he lacks the ability to imagine any life together outside of the bounds of society. He thinks he is protecting her, keeping her from the fate of social ostracism, but in retrospect, recounting the story to his friend, he recognizes his own cowardice:

> I had always looked on our love for each other, our possible relation to each other, as such situations are looked on in what is called society. I had supposed her, for all her freedom and originality, to be just as tacitly subservient to that view as I was: ready to take what she wanted on the terms in which society concedes such taking, and to pay for it by the usual restrictions, concealments and hypocrisies. In short, I supposed that she would "play the game"—look out for her own safety, and expect me to look out for it. It sounds cheap enough, put that way—but it's the rule we live under, all of us. And the amazement of finding her suddenly outside of it, oblivious of it, unconscious of it, left me, for an awful minute, stammering at her like a graceless dolt ... . (2: 315)

Although they wrangle with each other over the merits of running away together, the die is cast: Paulina Trant argues with "unfaltering logic," but Merrick can't resist what he thinks is the dutiful, protective, safe thing to do (2: 319). She sees only the sordidness of forced secrecy and concealment if they remain as they are; he sees the poverty of their lives as social outcasts. As Lyde notes, this story "is in no sense a blanket advocacy of adultery—indeed, quite the opposite, it attacks the clandestine liaison" (11). And yet, Wharton recognized that only the very rare individual possesses the courage it would take to break away from the web of society. A woman alone (especially a woman with no financial resources) could not do it. Take, for example, Lydia Tillotson in "Souls Belated," who lacks the courage or the money to confront the world with only her convictions; and what moves her lover Gannett to pity is his knowledge that she has

nowhere to go. Paulina Trant makes her dependent position absolutely clear to Halston Merrick: "Oh, my dear, I'm pleading for my life; do you suppose I shall ever want for arguments?" (2: 318).

Merrick only realizes his obtuseness, his fear, and his blindness in retrospect. As Paulina pleads for her life, he becomes "the creature of all conventional scruples" (2: 320), and tries to show her what their life in exile will be. When she finally tells him that "the only way to find out what doing will be like is to do it!" (2: 319), she suddenly has another thought:

> "No: there's one other way," she exclaimed; "and that is, *not* to do it! To abstain and refrain; and then see what we become, or what we don't become, in the long run, and to draw our inferences. That's the game that almost everybody about us is playing, I suppose; there's hardly one of the dull people one meets at dinner who hasn't had, just once, the chance of a berth on a ship that was off for the Happy Isles, and hasn't refused it for fear of sticking on a sand-bank!" (2: 319)

In the long run, of course, what they have become, or have not become, is all too apparent. We see it in the narrator's first impression of Paulina Trant, before he recognizes her "as one of the women in whom increasing years show rather what they have taken than what they have bestowed" (2: 303); and we see it in Merrick's impoverished intellect, his failure to live up to the promise of his youth.

The misery of their separate lives, the erasure of possibility, the dulling of existence, the wasted years, all add up to a portrayal of transgression as an extraordinarily positive force. Wharton makes it clear that if these two people had been able to turn their backs on convention, they would have found their way to emotional fulfilment; their lives and their love would have expanded. As it turns out, they have submitted themselves to "dull self-discipline" and "social submission" (2: 321). The tragic quality of their loss is that no one would have suffered from their transgression; no innocent people would have been affected in any way. Paulina tells Merrick that she is not theorizing, but only speaking from her own particular situation: "The woman in the next house may have all sorts of reasons—honest reasons—for staying there. There may be someone who needs her badly: for whom the lights would go out if she went" (2: 318). But that is not the case with her marriage; she has been nothing more to Philip Trant than a piece of furniture or some other possession. Her leaving will not make a dent in his soul. And Merrick is equally free. Thus the loss of all they might have become, not only to themselves but to their social set—her subversive talk and his potential as a writer would have brought a breath of fresh air, a hint of change to their world—makes "The Long Run" the clearest statement of the contextual morality at work in Wharton's stories. In this case, the morally right thing to do—to run away together, to transgress openly—is ultimately too frightening to Merrick; morally speaking, at the moment of decision, he is not worthy of Paulina. She is listening for the first time, she says, to "the voice of the real me, down

below, in the windowless underground hole where I keep her ...” (2: 318), while he is listening to the voice of society and trying to be a “man of honor” (2: 320). Although at the end he comes to understand the full tragic measure of his failure, it is (as it is for so many of Wharton’s characters) too late. Their inability to transgress has diminished them and destroyed their unique individuality. Paulina Trant and Halston Merrick have been “worn down” (2: 305) and made the same as everyone else in their social circle, indistinct except for the knowledge of what they have lost.

“The Long Run” resembles *The Age of Innocence* in a number of ways, but the moral decision in the novel is far more complicated and the characters are less free. Wharton began writing the novel six years after the story was published, but this is one of the rare occasions in Wharton’s career when a story and novel fit so well together that the story indeed might be the preparation for the novel. Wharton must have recognized that such an untrammeled existence, as unencumbered as the one she created in “The Long Run,” was rare. In most of her stories about individuals who dare to deviate from social convention, there is a significant amount of shame and secrecy involved, along with the recurring motif of renunciation, because of the complex “web of customs, manners, [and] culture” we weave about ourselves (“The Great American Novel” 652). As the moral choices in Wharton’s short fiction become more complicated, we can see the situations in which she demonstrates the values as well as the hazards of transgression, situations that reveal the costs of such behavior, not just the rewards.

In her most anthologized short story, “Roman Fever” (1934), Wharton explores the moral implications of sexual transgression and female rivalry. The confrontation between Alida Slade and Grace Ansley takes place in their “ripe but well-cared-for middle age,” but it is the culmination of two transgressive acts in their youth (2: 833). Lewis notes that “the success of the story lies in the leisurely, almost hesitant, manner of both the narrative and the dialogue, and in the abundance of echoes from past to present” (*Collected Stories* xxv). Wharton slowly reveals the limitations of the social “intimacy” the two women share, and the hidden animosity beneath the veneer of their friendship, until the final revelation, in the last sentence, of illegitimacy and deceit. But this is a story that invites re-reading, in part because the characterization of the two women is very subtle. In fact, their transgressions have colored their lives and irrevocably marked them. James Phelan’s rhetorical analysis of “Roman Fever” describes both the women and the relationship between them as “ethically ambiguous at best because both characters can be seen as seriously deficient” (343). Wharton’s portrayal of the two women illustrates the long-term effects of sexual indiscretion and violent hatred, and it shows transgression as both a positive and a destructive force.

As girls together in Rome, Alida and Grace had been rivals, both in love with Delphin Slade, although Alida was the one engaged to him. We find out in the course of the story that Alida lured Grace into the Colosseum at night by writing a note supposedly from Delphin asking her to meet him. Alida was re-enacting a story from Grace’s family,

of an aunt who had sent her younger sister (also a rival) out into the night air to collect a flower for her, a sister who then "caught the fever and died" (2: 839). Moved to confess, Alida tells Grace, "Of course I never thought you'd die" (2: 842). But Alida Slade's confession of her deception to Grace Ansley has a more powerful response than she expects, and Grace's pain moves Alida to probe the wound. Goaded by her rival, Grace reveals that Delphin actually did meet her that night, because she'd written back to him. And when Alida presses her further, Grace reveals that Delphin Slade is the father of her daughter, Barbara.

The depictions of Alida Slace and Grace Ansley throughout the story reflect Wharton's belief that the past lives on in the present. Both women suffer for acts of passion in their past, but Wharton arranges it so that we sympathize more readily with Grace Ansley's transgression than with Alida Slade's. Mrs. Slade is "the lady of high color and energetic brows" (2: 834), imperious with waiters, and clearly a woman who likes to be in charge. She controls the conversation and the action until the final page of the story, when Grace Ansley has her own secret to reveal. Wharton's characterization of Mrs. Slade is largely negative. Her musings on the lives of Grace and Horace Ansley, "those two nullities" (2: 835), are unpleasant, and her humor is aggressive. That she has always envied Grace becomes clear when she thinks to herself, "I must make one more effort not to hate her," when the full force of her violent passion is exposed (2: 839). We see her as a woman eaten up by envy, disappointed with her life, disappointed even in her loving, dutiful daughter, and never completely satisfied. She sneers at Grace, yet it seems as if she seeks absolution or forgiveness from Mrs. Ansley: "You do understand? I'd found out—and I hated you, hated you. I knew you were in love with Delphin—and I was afraid; afraid of you, of your quiet ways, your sweetness ... your ... well, I wanted you out of the way, that's all. Just for a few weeks; just till I was sure of him" (2: 841). After her confession, Alida Slade is "conscious of a strange sense of isolation, of being cut off from the warm current of human communion" (2: 842), a characteristic Wharton attributes to her least sympathetic characters. In "Roman Fever," Wharton shows that there is a transgressive force that is simply destructive and soul-destroying. Alida Slade's action in writing the letter was self-serving, motivated by greed and fear and hatred; and she did it presumably without a thought to the possible outcome. Or alternatively, according to Phelan, "we can infer … her willingness to accept its result: the death of the victim" (349). That she is haunted by guilt and shame is appropriate, according to Wharton, and the ending, where her life becomes "the great accumulated wreckage of passion and splendor at her feet" (2: 838), is appropriate too. One transgressive act has destroyed her life.

Grace Ansley's transgression, however, has given her something valuable. Like Catherine Glenn, in "Her Son," and Sophy Viner in *The Reef*, Grace Ansley experiences no guilt or shame, though clearly she has learned to live with regret. These characters have lost, suffered, and kept secret the core of their beings. They have lived exemplary

lives, at least in appearance, yet they have committed an act that would mark them as socially criminal, as fallen women. And that act has strengthened them and enriched them, even though it has brought them face to face with renunciation and loss. What each woman makes of her transgressive act is ultimately what gives it lasting significance. Sophy Viner's memory of her rather sordid affair with George Darrow provides an interesting gloss on "Roman Fever." We never know the immediate aftermath of Grace Ansley's night with Delphin Slade; he is something of a nonentity in the story, and although there is an indication that he cares little for Grace, we don't see her coming to terms with the fact. On the other hand, in *The Reef*, Sophy Viner transforms her affair and confronts Darrow with her version of the experience:

> "I wonder what your feeling for me was? ... Is it like taking a drink when you're thirsty? ... I used to feel as if all of me was in the palm of your hand. ... Don't think for a minute I'm sorry! It was worth every penny it cost. ... I'd always wanted adventures, and you'd given me one, and I tried to take your attitude about it, to 'play the game' and convince myself that I hadn't risked any more on it than you. Then when I met you again, I suddenly saw that I *had* risked more, but that I'd won more, too—such worlds! ... I've made my choice—that's all: I've had you and I mean to keep you. ... To keep you hidden away here," she ended, and put her hand upon her breast. (262-63)

It may be a fiction, but as Gloria Erlich notes in *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton*, each woman's interpretation of her experience demonstrates "a unique form of autonomy—that of her mind and imagination, which could convert flawed experience into the nourishment she required" (115).

What Grace Ansley has made of her experience is evident in her demeanor after Alida Slade reveals her treachery: "She seemed physically reduced by the blow—as if, when she got up, the wind might scatter her like a puff of dust." And she tells Alida, when pressed, not that she cared for the man, but that she "cared for that memory" (2: 842). Unlike Alida Slade, Grace Ansley makes no attempt to justify or excuse her behavior. She accepts the responsibility of her actions and has done so her entire life, without causing pain to others (the key for Wharton in moral and ethical behavior). Presumably Grace knew what kind of man Delphin Slade was from the start; perhaps his cowardice surfaced when he found himself engaged to one woman and sexually entangled with another. As Phelan points out, after Alida's revelation, Grace "must consider whether he was only an opportunist, someone willing to take advantage of a situation that others have set up for him," certainly not the man enshrined in her cherished memory (351). We know only that here, the woman pays for her indiscretion with a life of secrecy and submission to convention. And yet the fruit of that illicit union is an extraordinarily beautiful and vibrant daughter, whose very existence is a daily reminder, indeed the very embodiment, of that cherished memory. Wharton suggests that transgression need not be destructive, as long as the transgressors remain aware of their community, of their responsibilities to themselves and to others. There is a transgressive

force that is positive and life-affirming, for which guilt or shame is unnecessary. And yet, at the end of the story, Grace Ansley crosses the line from being a wholly sympathetic character to being momentarily rather suspect. Admittedly, she has been goaded into it, but when she turns on Alida Slade and delivers the final blow ("I had Barbara"), the reader experiences the scene as a moment of cruel revenge. As White notes, "Mrs. Ansley ends one up but as sick as Mrs. Slade. ... They both have Roman fever" (10). Of the two women, however, Grace is certainly the more positive character, despite her violation of the moral code by pursuing another woman's fiancé. As Phelan points out, part of what is most "disturbing" about the ending of the story, is how the reader's conception of character must be "reconfigure[ed]" by the slow disclosure of information by the narrator: "Our reconfiguration helps us recognize that Wharton has taken Grace, a character who, by measure of conventional morality, has acted very dishonorably—pursuing her friend's fiancé to the point of sleeping with him—and presented her as more sinned against than sinning" (352). In Wharton's judgment, the violation of conventional morality is less vile than the purposeful infliction of cruelty.

Did Wharton possess the radical imagination necessary to envision social change? Her critique of the power of social institutions and social conventions suggests that she did, and her generally sympathetic portrayal of transgressors suggests that she saw transgression as the necessary first step in preparing for change. But Wharton had no illusions about the span of time needed for social transformation. In "Autre Temps," for example, a mother's divorce and consequent social ostracism linger, while her daughter's generation sees nothing wrong in ending a marriage. According to White, "the subject is not really divorce but the violation of social mores. The first people to break with convention will be stigmatized forever, even after the convention has been discarded" (75). Wharton recognized the intransigence of habit and custom, and she knew that most individuals lack the courage to rebel in the face of that. In "The Long Run," Paulina Trant's explanation to Halston Merrick of the moral vicissitudes of society, her conviction that those people who might shun them for their transgression will one day come around, is clearly Wharton's view: "For society's getting so deplorably lax that, little by little, it will edge up to us—you'll see!" (2: 318). We can see the same vision of social fluidity in *The Age of Innocence*, when the very worst thing Larry Lefferts can imagine—"We shall see our children fighting for invitations to swindler's houses, and marrying Beaufort's bastards" (351)—literally comes true in the end of the novel, when Dallas Archer becomes engaged to Beaufort's daughter Fanny. But while Wharton recognized the culture's (eventual) capacity for encompassing social change, her moral vision was clear enough to recognize how painful the process of such change could be to the individuals who prepared the way.

In her discussion of Wharton's moral vision, Lyde argues that Wharton "was confronted with the problem of finding some other basis for belief which could be strong enough and firm enough to motivate moral discipline and endow life with significance"

(60). For Wharton herself, art provided that motivation and significance. In *The Writing of Fiction*, she states that it is "the eternal effort of art to complete what in life seems incoherent and fragmentary" (107). The relationship between the individual and society, so problematic and entangled, provided her with that primary and eternal task—to try in her fiction to demonstrate the need for a new moral order, more progressive and respectful of individual desire. Wharton seems to have recognized that while human moral experience can't necessarily be codified, it needs to be examined and evaluated, over and over again. And transgression, that moment when the individual rebels, resists, or defies, was for Wharton the focal point of her examination of moral experience. These stories suggest that Wharton saw transgression as an unavoidable (though not always positive) force, necessary in many ways for breaking out of whatever binds and stifles the human soul: social institutions, internalized and external expectations, custom. And her portrayal of transgression asks us to reconsider how we define morality and criminality. In all of her stories of transgressive acts, there is a return to a moral position, implied if not actual. That position is often based on personal responsibility, which is, as Lyde points out, "in the final analysis, a matter of moral awareness, of the ability to judge one's moral obligations" (138). Responsibility, awareness, knowledge—these are the guides to ethical behavior. Appetite is not. And unless an accommodation can be made between responsibility and desire, Wharton's stories tell us, renunciation is the only moral response. Of course, Wharton's persistent portrayal of the impossibility of reconciling individual desire with one's moral obligations points to her tragic vision, the pervasive sense in her writing that inevitable loss is simply part of the human condition, to be embraced, to be accepted.

For Wharton, the creation of art, of beauty, became an act of faith. In her fiction, while she rarely denounces transgression, her transgressive characters suffer for their actions. For those characters, renunciation often becomes the beautiful act that restores significance to their lives. As an epigraph to her novella *The Mother's Recompense*, Wharton used a line from Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*: "Desolation is a delicate thing." Such knowledge is hard won, but to live without such knowledge, Wharton seems to say, is even more tragic.

Works Cited

Arizti, Bárbara and Silvia Martínez-Falquina, editors. Introduction. *On the Turn: The Ethics of Fiction in Contemporary Narrative in English.* Cambridge Scholars, 2007, pp. ix-xxiii.

Erlich, Gloria. *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton*. U California P, 1992.

Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar. *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 2, Yale UP, 1988-89.

Joslin, Katherine. *Edith Wharton.* St. Martin's, 1991.

Lewis, R. W. B. *Edith Wharton: A Biography.* Fromm, 1985.

___ . Introduction. *The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton.* Scribner's, 1968, pp. vii-xxv.

Lewis, R. W. B. and Nancy Lewis, editors. *The Letters of Edith Wharton.* Scribner's, 1989.

Lyde, Marilyn Jones. *Edith Wharton: Convention and Morality in the Work of a Novelist.* U Oklahoma P, 1959.

Phelan, James. "Narrative as Rhetoric and Edith Wharton's 'Roman Fever': Progression, Configuration, and the Ethics of Surprise." *A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism,* edited by Walter Jost and Wendy Olmstead. Blackwell, 2004, pp. 340-54.

Wharton, Edith. *The Age of Innocence*. Appleton, 1920.

___ . *The Collected Short Stories of Edith Wharton*. Edited by R. W. B. Lewis, vol. 2, Scribner's, 1968.

___ . "The Great American Novel." *Yale Review,* vol.16, 1927, pp. 646-56.

___ . *The Reef.* Appleton, 1912.

___ . *The Writing of Fiction.* Scribner's, 1925.

White, Barbara. *Edith Wharton: A Study of the Short Fiction.* Twayne, 1991.